

THE SPIRITUAL ISSUES OF THE WAR

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BELGIAN CATHOLICS AND PROTESTANTS RESIST TOGETHER

In a recent address in St. Paul's Cathedral, Professor Emile Cammaerts, Professor of Belgian Studies at the University of London, spoke of the resistance of the Catholic Church in Belgium. We are grateful for the opportunity of printing his address.

In October 1942, Abbé de Necker wrote a letter, from his prison in Bruges, to his old father, from which I should like to quote a few lines: "... You need not be ashamed of your Emmanuel. I have lived to give back Belgium to Christ. Such is the sentence which condemns me 'for spying and rendering service to the enemy.' ... The Master gives me, through His grace, the privilege of knowing beforehand the day and time of my death, so that I may prepare myself during two months of prayer and penitence. What a fine retreat! 'What fine resolutions,' I thought, when I still hoped to recover my freedom. The good God contents Himself with my resolutions. It is safer so ... My only sorrow comes from the pain I am inflicting on those whom I am leaving behind. I ask you to forgive me this, as well as all the wickedness of my life. I ask forgiveness from all those whom I have offended, as I forgive absolutely all my enemies, whether weak or strong. I have prayed for them. May the good God also forgive me."

Such proclamations of faith have been made by members of the Church belonging to all oppressed nations, including Germany. Christians of all denominations can understand them and take their share in them.

The first paragraph, however, in which Abbé de Necker speaks of "giving back Belgium to Christ" and of the "dangerous work he had undertaken" requires some explanation.

It shows two things: first, that good Belgian Catholics cannot separate patriotism from Christianity, and, secondly, that some of them do not hesitate to undertake any kind of work, including spying, in order to achieve the liberation of their country, not because this liberation will necessarily give her "back to Christ," but because they believe that through freedom alone will she have a chance of returning to Christ.

I am not here to remind you that the Roman Church has opposed Hitler's idolatry as early and as strongly as the non-Roman Catholic Churches. The Pope's encyclical, *Mit brennender Sorge*, is dated March 13th, 1937, and ever since the fight has gone on, and the number of martyrs increased. In Belgium alone, a score of priests have been shot, and hundreds of them have been sent to prison and German camps. Through the untiring efforts of Dr. Micklem, among others, Christians in England know by now that they should no longer make disparaging comparisons between the resistance opposed by the various Christian denominations to Hitler's New Order. One good at least has emerged from the present ordeal: The realisation that if we, Christians, are not yet able to unite in accepting the same things in the same way, we are already united in rejecting the same things, because they are radically opposed to any Christian order.

What I should like to do is to explain the character of this rejection more particularly in my own country, where, as you know, practically all believers—roughly, 3½ out of 8 millions—are Roman Catholics. Before I do so, let me quote an extract from another letter. It is written by an older man, Abbé

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Peters, curé of the small village of Comblain-au-Pont, near Liège, shot on August 31st, 1943.

... "My dear Brethren, by the love of God and the Holy Virgin, by the love of the Catholic Church and our Country, by the love of Comblain-au-Pont and your cherished families, do not forget the teaching I have given you. Love God above all things, . . . and love each other through the love of God. . . . And for the last time I cry aloud, 'All for God and the Blessed Virgin Mary,' 'Long Live the Catholic Church,' 'Long Live Belgium,' 'Long Live Comblain-au-Pont.'

"Your Rector, who loves you now and will continue to love you in Heaven,

"JOS. PETERS."

This old curé walked to his death, wearing the decorations he had won during the last war, and singing the *Te Deum*. Abbé de Necker had died some months before in order "to give back Belgium to Christ." We might almost say that Abbé Peters died to give back Comblain-au-Pont to Christ. The first could not separate the love of country from the love of God, the second could not separate the love of his belfry from the love of God. This is very characteristic of the resistance of the Church in Belgium.

Is not this worship of town and country somewhat dangerous? Could it not lead to an idolatry similar to the one we are fighting? "God forbid," as St. Paul says. What these priests are dying for is not a stronger country or a larger village. They are quite content with the material things placed in their charge. They are dying for a more Christian country, a more Christian village. A country and a village whose free citizens would be given a chance of loving and glorifying God. That is why there can never be in their mind any opposition, any conflict, between patriotism and Christianity. They start, so to speak, from humble things and look up to higher things, while most of us here, in England, prefer to start from the Gospel, and consider smaller things in the light of the Gospel. For this reason it may be easier for some of us to understand the resistance of our Lutheran and Calvinist brethren on the Continent than that of our Catholic brethren. In the Barmen declaration and in Bishop Berggrav's pastoral letter, insistence is placed on the Church's right to preach the Word of God "entire and unchanged." In both cases, the Lutherans challenge the right of the State to dictate an interpretation of the Gospel in order to further political interest. In the Papal encyclical of 1937, and in the declarations made by Car-

dinal van Roey, Archbishop of Malines, the Catholics uphold the right of the Church to concern herself with all questions which directly or indirectly might affect her interest. This difference is due partly to the attitude taken by the Nazis and their Quislings towards Catholics, on the one hand, and non-Catholics on the other; but it is also due to the traditional attitude of the Roman Church towards the temporal power. I do not wish to discuss here whether this attitude has always been justified, but merely to show how it affects the character of Catholic resistance to Nazism.

On the morrow of the invasion. Hitler endeavored to win the collaboration of the Roman Catholic Church in Belgium. The German Governor, General von Falkenhäusen, was chosen because he was related to a Belgian Catholic family. The members of the clergy were first treated with respect and granted some privileges. A representative of the Governor called on Cardinal van Roey, and expressed his master's wish to entertain good relations with the Church. "That depends on you," answered the Cardinal, "leave the Church to her task." Everything hangs on the interpretation of these words. If the task of the Church had only been the preaching of the Word of God or the cure of souls, a kind of compromise might have been possible, at least at the beginning, since at that time the Germans were far too absorbed with political and economic activities to pay much attention to spiritual matters. But when the Cardinal spoke of the "task of the Church," he used these words as the Pope used them in his encyclical, and as Cardinal Mercier had used them in Belgium, thirty years before, during his prolonged conflict with Governor von Bissing. He was not content with the exercise of purely ecclesiastical activities, he claimed the right to protect his people—irrespective of class and party—against every form of political and economic oppression.

In his Pastoral Letter of December 1940, the Cardinal already declared that it would be "for a free and sovereign Belgium, and for her alone to determine what part she would play in the New Europe." As early as October 1941, he publicly stigmatised any form of collaboration, and expressed his confidence in ultimate liberation: "Reason and good sense point to confidence and resistance, because we know that our country will be restored and will live again."

As starvation and oppression became more cruel, his voice became louder. He protested against Sunday labour imposed in the mines,

against the removal of the church bells, against the wholesale deportation of hundreds of thousands of workers, including women, to Germany; he exposed the deliberate misstatements of German propaganda; he forbade the administration of Holy Communion to young Fascists in uniform, and even the celebration of requiem mass, under certain conditions, for those so-called anti-bolshevist volunteers who had fallen on the Russian front. Once more, as thirty years ago, when Cardinal Mercier led the Belgian clergy against the invader, these instructions were obeyed by all the members of the hierarchy, these protests were echoed in every church in the country.

Von Falkenhausen has had to make room for one of Himmler's agents. The Gestapo rules supreme in the land. It is a powerful secret organization, but the Church is also powerful, and has her own discipline. She recently ex-communicated the arch-collaborator Degrelle. Although some of the Cardinal's best friends, like Abbé Cardijn, the founder of Jocism, and Monseigneur van Weyemberg, Rector of the University of Louvain, were arrested, the Cardinal, surrounded by his faithful bishops, remains the pillar of the spiritual resistance of the country, just as the King, in his castle of Laeken, remains the symbol of her political resistance.

The golden rule for all men, more particularly for Christians, should be to try to understand each other before judging each other. If Christians of this country had had to undergo the ordeal of starvation and oppression which the Christians of the occupied countries have had to undergo for nearly four years, I am convinced that great leaders would have risen up here, and noble martyrs, too. It would not be very difficult to give certain names, even now. God has his own instruments and they work in different ways, according to the land in which they are used, since He made the nations different. It is a mystery which it would be presumptuous on my part to try to explain. God apparently, in this great crisis, in this great judgment, used for His purpose Pope Pius XII, Pastor Niemöller, Bishop Berggrav, and Cardinal van Roey, not to forget hundreds of Protestants and Catholics who gave their lives to preserve the Gospel and to save their land, their towns and villages, like Abbé de Necker, and the old Curé of Comblain-au-Pont.

Protestant Activities

Professor Cammaerts dealt mainly with the Roman Catholic Church.

The Swiss paper, *Semteur Vaudois*, recently included details from Protestant life in Belgium. From this we see the determination of the Churches to carry on in spite of all difficulties, and to keep hope and faith alive in the hearts of the people.

The Church has become a shelter for all those who are surrounded by threats of death, by famine and by the agony of a revival of great military operations. The moral stability of Christians is impressive. Bombing, forced exile, sorrow and ruins; all this is not sufficient to make them doubt the love of God. Their confidence is affirmed from day to day by the personal discipline of prayer and by the collective discipline of communion and sharing. For as a result of the famine it has been necessary to arrange for distribution of food and for collective plots of potatoes. The "agapes" which in times of peace were joyous occasions of festivity have been transformed into "soups of brotherhood" where all take part.

If One Member Suffers . . .

Help goes further than this. The community is preoccupied with the health of its members. At Frameries a young man suffering from tuberculosis of the bone is supported by the care and the intercession of the Church. Our fellow-countryman, Pastor Ferdinand Barth, 70 years old, who was declared consumptive by the doctors, was able after three months to take up his work again as Pastor in the district of Liège. This cure is considered to be an answer to the prayers of his community.

"Provided that we are together, we are ready to undergo anything," writes the Pastor of Quaregnon, one of those who have known imprisonment. Intercessory prayer is certainly the means which God has given so that his children may never feel lonely. The deported youth in his room in the Ruhr, or the prisoner in his barracks, has the sense of family solidarity with his friends at home. Prayer is the great and constant bond between all those who live and suffer in Christ.

Care for Others

Although the numbers of the Reformed in Belgium are very small, yet in a number of districts they care for many of the needy. At Courcelles, a city of 10,000 inhabitants, the Reformed young people have for ten years past organised a supper for the aged at Christmas. At Chénée, a suburb of Liège, since the first winter of the war the Consistory (parish council) has asked the

district office for a list of families of needy soldiers, and have helped them by procuring warm clothes, repaired with care. Among those who were helped, one father of a family wanted to know why they helped him and his dependants. He has now again become attached to the congregation, because he has understood the disinterestedness of the Church. There was also a poor woman, mother of two small children, who was prevented from committing suicide. She was so miserable and so discouraged that she had decided to finish with this life, both for herself and for her children. The appearance on this day of lady visitors of the Reformed parish seemed to her to be a direct intervention of God, and for three years she has shown a deep acknowledgment of it.

Imprisoned Pastors

News from Geneva gives a glimpse of the background against which the day-to-day work of the Churches is carried on:—

"The Church in Belgium is praying in particular for three pastors and spiritual leaders who are in prison. Because of the denunciation of a young parishioner one of them was condemned in 1941 to five years in a foreign penitentiary. The son of one of the pastors is in prison awaiting his execution."

DR. HENRY SLOANE COFFIN'S IMPRESSIONS OF BRITAIN

In *Christianity and Crisis* (January 24th, 1944) Dr. Henry Sloane Coffin (President of Union Theological Seminary, New York) contributes an article headed "Impressions of Britain." Dr. Coffin's addresses in this country during his recent visit made a deep impression, and many of our readers will be interested to see his own reflections after his visit.

After a vivid account of material and psychological conditions, Dr. Coffin writes:—

"When one meets with leaders who are trying to look ahead, one finds an absence of the precise plans of world-reconstruction so frequently brought forth here. Britons are so close to the situation, have endured and are enduring so much, that they live from day to day. They are keenly aware of the difficulties in bringing order out of chaos and settling Europe on foundations of justice, not to speak of so settling the Near and Far East. They are profoundly grateful for Russia which they know has saved them

from unspeakable losses. They admire her magnificent military achievements and the surprising industrial production of her people. They cherish the hope that Russia may see in the collective security of the United Nations sufficient safeguard against attack on her western frontiers, and will allow her smaller neighbours some measure of independent life, so that they may conserve their distinctive cultures and institutions. But they recognise that should Russia insist on fairly large territorial gains, neither they nor we or any other nation can stop her. They are much comforted by the results of the conference in Moscow and the subsequent meeting of Stalin with Churchill and Roosevelt. Among intelligent people there is discussion on international affairs and on the problems of the British Commonwealth; but one rarely hears the confident solutions propounded here. Britons are too keenly aware of the complexity of the questions, and their own history and habit of thought make them distrustful of short-cuts to desirable ends. They foresee a long road towards goals which they share with us. If the road can be travelled swiftly in some of its stretches, they will be glad; but they know there are many stretches where the going will be hard, and they are a patient people accustomed to accumulate small gains in freedom and justice and friendship, and gains which they have managed to conserve."

On Anglo-American relationships, Dr. Coffin writes:—

"In the post-war epoch the two great Anglo-Saxon powers will undoubtedly struggle with each other for trade in many markets. Such economic conflict readily breeds suspicion and ill-will. Hence the importance of maintaining cultural ties through our universities and similar groups of thoughtful persons, and above all of deepening our spiritual unity through the work of the churches. It is when one moves in academic and church circles that the basic kinship in faith and ideals of the two peoples is most felt. They and we are at bottom one in the things of the spirit—in the love of liberty, in the longing for righteousness, in confidence in truth.

"Beneath surface indications of weariness and of strain one is impressed with the massive qualities of the British soul. Courage, conscientiousness, determination to discover and do that which is right and faith that right must eventually triumph in God's world—these superb virtues abound in the British character."